

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION



March/April 2021

Xplor



FURRY SWIMMERS

NOT ALL DOG-PADDLERS ARE DOGS

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Wild turkeys have a language all their own. We'll help you learn to speak it.

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Baby opossums leave mom's pouch when they're about 2 months old. But the little pouch potatoes can't survive on their own. So for the next several weeks, mom becomes a furry, four-legged minivan.

📷 by Jim Rathert



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ON THE COVER

American Mink

by Noppadol Paothong

GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO
AND GREAT PLACES
TO DISCOVER NATURE



Try the taste of spring. **REDBUDS START BLOOMING** in late March. Their blossoms add a pop of color and tangy flavor to salads.



WALK A TRAIL to enjoy the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of spring.

Many Missouri turtles become active in late March. You can **HELP TURTLES CROSS THE ROAD** by carrying them in the direction they were headed — but only if it's safe to do so.



Baltimore oriole



Prothonotary warbler

SONGBIRDS ARE RETURNING TO MISSOURI.

Keep them from flying into reflective windows by sticking easy-to-remove painter's tape or decals to the outside of big panes.



Indigo bunting



The youth portion of Missouri's 2021 **SPRING TURKEY SEASON** is April 10 and 11. Learn the pros and cons of various turkey calls on Page 6.

WHAT IS?

DON'T KNOW?
Jump to Page 20 to find out.



- ❶ My eggs look like berries.
- ❷ My tail is their home.

- ❸ My hatchlings stick close ...
- ❹ ... till they're ready to roam.



Into the WILD

dead snag

Even after death, trees provide homes and food for lots of life.

LOOK

Woodpeckers

hammer on dead snags to find insects to eat, make nest holes, and tap out messages to fellow woodpeckers. The next time you visit a snag, keep your eyes peeled for these head-banging birds.

Did You Know?

Red-bellied woodpeckers

have super-long tongues that they use to probe inside hammered-out holes. The tongue is needle sharp — perfect for harpooning bugs — and barbed at the tip so dinner can't wiggle away.

Downy

Red-headed

Hairy

Red-bellied

Pileated



LOOK

Mama **raccoons** often turn hollow trees into nurseries. In the summer, you might spot her ring-tailed babies practicing their tree-climbing skills.



Take a Closer Look

Can you spot the owl? Camouflaged feathers make an **eastern screech-owl** disappear against a barky background. To find screechers in the wild, listen for songbirds raising a ruckus. Small birds gather near owls and fuss to try to drive the predatory birds away.

SPRING

FALL

Take a Closer Look

Mourning cloak butterflies spend winter huddled in tree cavities or under loose bark. Though the upper side of their wings is brightly colored, the underside is well-camouflaged. This helps hide them from hungry birds. With their wings folded, mourning cloaks become nearly invisible against a tree's trunk.

What Happened Here?

The squiggly lines you find when bark falls off of dead snags are made by baby insects. Many kinds of beetle larvae tunnel under the bark. They eat the tree as they go and leave behind winding paths called "galleries."

Did You Know?

When weather turns chilly, **southern flying squirrels** snuggle together inside hollow trees. Their furry bodies can warm the den by 30 degrees, and the more squirrels there are, the toastier it gets. Fifty squirrels have been found packed into a single tree!

LOOK

When a tree dies — sometimes even before — it becomes food for shelf mushrooms. The next time you find a snag, see how many of these colorful fungi you can spot.



Turkey tail



Resinous polypore



Chicken of the woods



Ling chih



Artist conk

Few things make your heart pound harder than calling a wild turkey into close range.

Talking TURKEY

by Matt Seek

If you're a nature lover, turkeys are endlessly entertaining to watch. And if you're a sportsperson, they're a thrill to hunt. But turkeys are wary birds, and trying to sneak up on one is a good way to learn what the south end of a northbound bird looks like. To get up-close and personal with this careful critter, your best bet is to fool it into thinking you're a friendly member of the flock. And to do that, you'll need to learn how to talk turkey.

Yelp

Squeaky, high-pitched yelps are the most-used words in turkey talk. Three to seven yelps strung together is how a turkey says: "I'm here. Come see me." It's also how a hen tells a gobbler: "Howdy, handsome! Let's go on a date."



Learn the Language

Turkeys are chatty birds that make many sounds. Next time you're near a flock, listen for these common calls.



Caw or Hoot

Aggressive gobblers can't stand letting other birds have the last word. So when a crow caws or an owl hoots, a nearby tom will often belt out a loud, defiant gobble. The next time you're in the woods, make a loud hoot and see if a nearby gobbler answers back.



Putt

Uh-oh! Something seems suspicious. A sharp, worried **PUTT!** is how turkeys warn others of danger.

Gobble

Adult male turkeys, called gobblers or toms, rip out a thunderous **GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE!** to attract hens and let other toms know who's boss.

Cluck

Turkeys often cluck like chickens while they're moving around looking for food. Happy clucking tells other turkeys: "Chill out. Relax. Life is good."

Purr

A soft, catlike purr is made — along with clucks — when turkeys feel safe or when they're feeding. It reassures other turkeys in the group that everything's OK.



Tools of the Trade

Turkey calls help hunters (and birdwatchers) cluck, purr, and yelp like a turkey calling to its friends. There are many kinds of calls, and each has pros and cons.



BOX Call

Most new hunters learn to call by using a box call, which is simply a small wooden box with an open top.

The lid, or paddle, is stroked over the edges of the box to make sound. By changing the speed of the stroke and the pressure on the paddle, you can create yelps, clucks, purrs, putts, and other turkey sounds.

Good: Box calls are easy to use, which makes them great for beginners. They're also quite loud and work well when the woods are noisy, like on windy days.

Bad: Box calls may work poorly in wet or humid weather. Some must have chalk applied to the paddle before they'll make realistic sounds. And, unless you have three hands, you can't hold a shotgun or binoculars and use a box call at the same time.

PUSH-BUTTON Call

A push-button call is the easiest way for a rookie to make lifelike yelps. All you have to do is push a spring-loaded button. This causes a pencil-sized rod to rub inside a small box, producing sound. By changing the pressure, speed, and rhythm on the button, you can make different sounds.

Good: Push-button calls are dead simple to use. You can work them with one hand, leaving the other free to reach for a shotgun or a pair of binoculars.

Bad: Push-button calls are one-hit wonders. They produce a few calls well, but they don't make the wide variety of sounds that other calls can offer.



SLATE Call

With just a little extra practice, you can use a slate call (aka pot call) to make a wider variety of turkey sounds than you can with either a push-button or box call. To make a slate call "talk," you scratch a pencil-shaped striker across a disc of slate, glass, or metal.

Good: With a slate call, you can make nearly any sound a real turkey can make.

Bad: Slate calls are a little trickier to learn than other hand-held calls. They're not as loud, either, so turkeys may have trouble hearing you on windy days. And it's hard to hold a shotgun or binoculars and work a slate call at the same time.

MOUTH Call

You use a mouth call kind of like how you play a clarinet: You put the call in your mouth and force air over a thin piece of plastic. By changing the shape of your mouth and varying how hard you blow, you can fool a turkey into having quite a conversation with you.

Good: A mouth call lets you shoulder a shotgun or peer through binoculars while also calling to a turkey. In the hands — oops, mouth — of an experienced caller, mouth calls make a variety of realistic turkey sounds.

Bad: The only downside to a mouth call is its steep learning curve. Beginners are better off using hand-held calls.



Help for Your Yelps



Talking turkey well enough to fool real birds takes practice. You can search online for turkey calling videos to help hone your skills. (For a quick lesson on using a box call, check out short.mdc.mo.gov/ZaX.) Or register for a turkey hunting class at mdc.mo.gov/events. But the best way to learn is to find an experienced caller who's willing to take you under his or her wing.



Make a Homemade Turkey Call

There's no need to rush out and buy a call if you're itching to try talking to a turkey. It's easy to make a call at home by recycling a few items you probably already have in your kitchen.

» Here's What You Need

- Empty yogurt cup (Make sure it's washed!)
- Drinking straw
- Scissors
- Duct tape
- Brown, green, or black paint



» Here's What You Do

- 1 Trim the straw so it's a couple inches taller than the yogurt cup.
- 2 Tape the straw inside the yogurt cup. Leave a space about the width of your pinky between the bottom of the straw and the bottom of the cup.
- 3 Paint the cup with brown, green, or black paint, or use camouflage duct tape to cover the cup as we've done in the picture.



» How to Use Your Call

Hold the tip of the straw in your lips and sip like you're giving someone a noisy kiss. With practice, you'll soon be able to produce a sharp yelp.



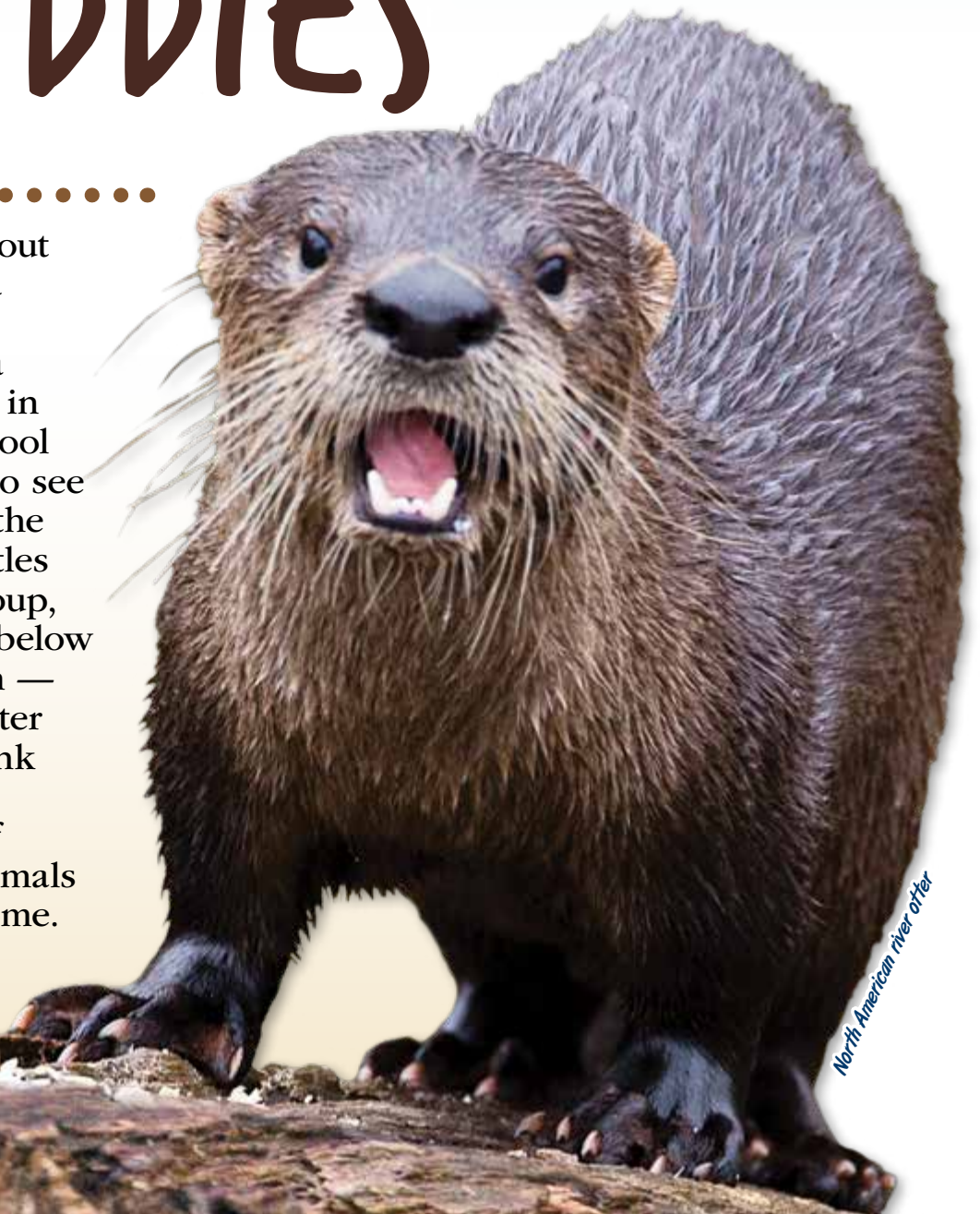


FURRY FLOAT BUDDIES

by Bonnie
Chasteen

The best thing about paddling around a farm pond or shuttling off to a stream — especially in spring — is all the cool things you're likely to see while you're out on the water. Frogs and turtles splashing into the soup, silvery fish flashing below your boat — hold on — what's that furry critter sliding down the bank and into the water?

It could be one of several aquatic mammals that call Missouri home.



North American river otter

WARM-BLOODED, FUR-COVERED WATER-LOVERS

The science-y phrase, “aquatic mammal,” basically means “furry, warm-blooded critter that makes itself at home in the water.” Mammals that live near but not in the water are called “semi-aquatic.” This could include humans, too. Some river-loving people call themselves “river rats.” Are you a river rat?

Whether they live in bank-side burrows or just hunt from the bank, Missouri’s aquatic and semi-aquatic mammals are all good swimmers. Some share similar features like webbed toes or “swim goggle” eyes, and others have scaly, oarlike tails. Let’s get to know each critter and find out when and where you’re likely to see them.

Good swimmers

Webbed toes, tapered bodies, and oarlike tails help otters, beavers, and muskrats move like acrobats in the water.

Built for working underwater

Clear “swim goggle” eyelids, closeable noses and ears, and sensitive whiskers help otters and beavers navigate in the water.



North American river otter

Well-insulated

Otters and beavers come with their own layered wet suits that keep them warm, even under the ice. They start with an insulating layer of fat under the skin. Then there’s a short, thick, oily layer of fur next to the skin. And on top of that, there’s a glossy coat of guard hairs.

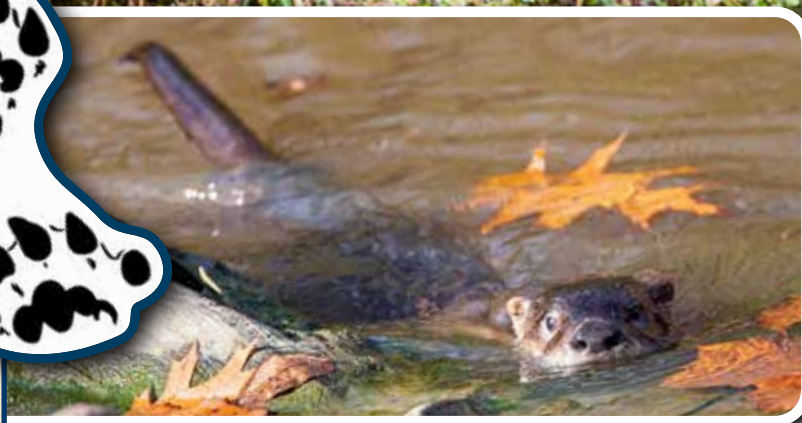


American beaver



NORTH AMERICAN RIVER OTTER

These aquatic clowns are well-suited to life in the water. They have sleek, streamlined bodies and fully webbed feet. Their long, tapered tails are thick at the base and flat on the bottom. Their ears and nose close when they go underwater, and they can stay under for three to four minutes. They have lots of sensitive whiskers that help them find crayfish in the water, even at night. Although they are mostly nighttime hunters, they're active all year. You may see one (or several) sliding down a snowy or muddy bank — *splash* — right into the water! The name “river otter” tells you where you're most likely to see them.





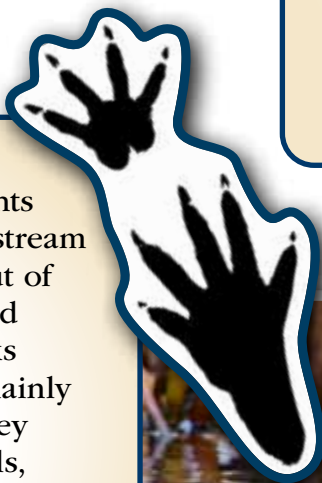
AMERICAN MINK

Minks and otters are cousins. You could think of them as water weasels, although the mink is less aquatic than the otter. It lives in margins between water and woods under tree roots and logs or in old, bank-side muskrat burrows. Like the otter, it works the night shift, and it tends to keep to itself. Still, you might see one (or a young family) hunting in daylight this spring or summer. They're fast runners as well as good swimmers, and they're known to eat young rabbits as well as fish, crawdads, and even ducks. They often stash their food in their dens to eat later.



COMMON MUSKRAT

These medium-sized water rodents dig burrows in pond, lake, and stream banks, or they build big dens out of sticks and cattails in marshes and wetlands. While otters and minks mostly eat meat, muskrats are mainly plant eaters. In marshy areas, they eat the roots and stems of cattails, rushes, and lotuses. Muskrats living along Ozark streams will eat mussels, snails, crayfish, and frogs as well as water plants. When swimming, the muskrat's slim, scaly tail paddles back and forth, almost finlike, behind it.



AMERICAN BEAVER

The beaver is Missouri's largest aquatic mammal, and a big one can be 54 inches long and weigh 90 pounds — probably bigger than you! Unlike muskrats, which have long tails, the beaver has a broad, flat tail that serves as an all-purpose tool. In the water, it works as a rudder and a propeller. On land, it serves as a kickstand to help the beaver balance on its hind feet while it chomps down trees.

Like muskrats, beavers build lodges, where they sleep and raise their families. While muskrats make their lodges out of cattails and rushes, beavers build theirs out of sticks, branches, and logs. Either water rodent may also make a home by digging into a stream bank. Unlike muskrats, beavers never eat meat — only bark, twigs, pond lilies, and other plants. Both critters have special lips that close behind their teeth to keep water from flowing into their throats as they swim with branches or cattails in their mouths.

Beavers are mostly active at night, but it's possible to spot them just before sundown in the evening or just after sunrise in the morning. If you're lucky, you may see a beaver sunning itself or using its hind toes to comb oil through its fur.



A Sure Sign

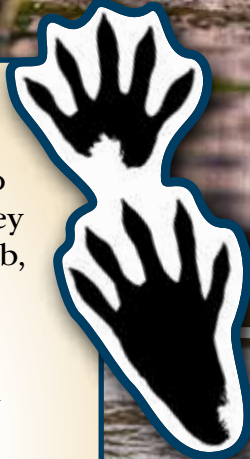
If you find pointy tree stumps along a stream or lake, you can bet they're the work of a busy beaver. To spot a beaver's lodge, scan the water for a heap of branches or look for a burrow dug into a stream bank.





RACCOON

These masked mammals aren't aquatic, but they do like living near water. They swim as well as they climb, so they're just as likely to splash in the water for mussels and crayfish as they are to reach for tasty blossoms, mushrooms, and fruit. Like most of the float buddies profiled here, raccoons are creatures of the night. They start prowling for food around sundown, so you might spot a ring-tailed shadow slipping along the stream near the end of your day on the river.



© Holly Kuchera | Dreamstime.com



LABRADOR RETRIEVER

OK, NOT a native aquatic mammal, but a true water dog — and a Missouri river rat's best friend. Don't be surprised if one paddles out to say hi when you float by.

THIS
ISSUE:

EASTERN GARTERSNAKE VS. SHORT-TAILED SHREW

illustrated by
David Besenger

Backward Biters

A gartersnake's teeth curl inward. Once prey is seized, the only direction it can move is toward the snake's tummy.

Jumbo Jaws

Special jawbones allow a snake to stretch its mouth around prey that's much larger than the snake's head.

Tiny but Toxic

Short-tailed shrews produce venomous saliva that paralyzes small prey like insects and hinders the heart of larger victims.

Hungry, Hungry Hunter

To survive, a shrew must eat up to half its body weight each day. Its appetite makes a shrew feistier than larger predators.

AND THE WINNER IS...

In a battle between predators, the winner is often decided by who strikes first. This time, the shrew sinks its fangs into the snake's neck, and the mini mammal's venom takes care of the rest.

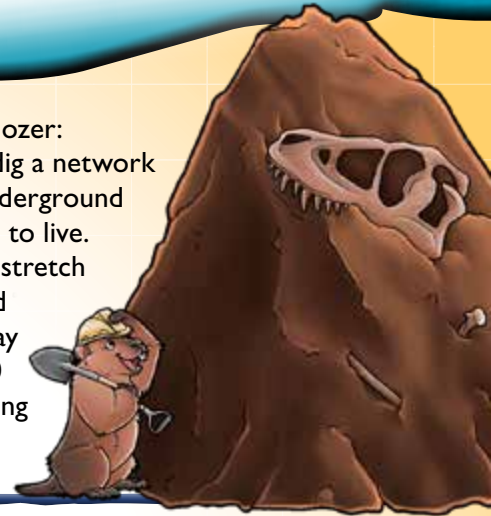
STRANGE but TRUE!

YOUR GUIDE TO ALL THE
UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND **UNBELIEVABLE**
STUFF THAT GOES ON IN NATURE

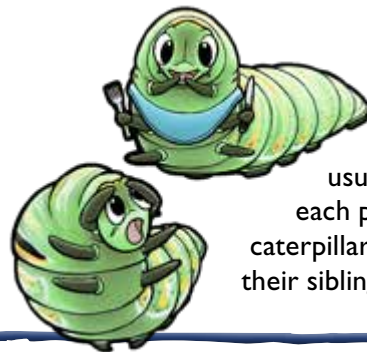
RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS can fly up, down, forward, backward, sideways, and even upside-down. The tiny birds can streak toward a flower at 25 mph and come to a dead stop in a space no longer than your pointer finger.



Better than a bulldozer: **WOODCHUCKS** dig a network of burrows and underground chambers in which to live. Their tunnels may stretch almost 80 feet, and the woodchuck may remove nearly 700 pounds of soil during construction.



Why so blue? During mating season, the inside of a **DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT'S** mouth turns bright blue. When a female approaches a male's nest site, he spreads his beak wide open to show off his sky-colored pie hole.



There's a good reason why **ZEBRA SWALLOWTAIL BUTTERFLIES**

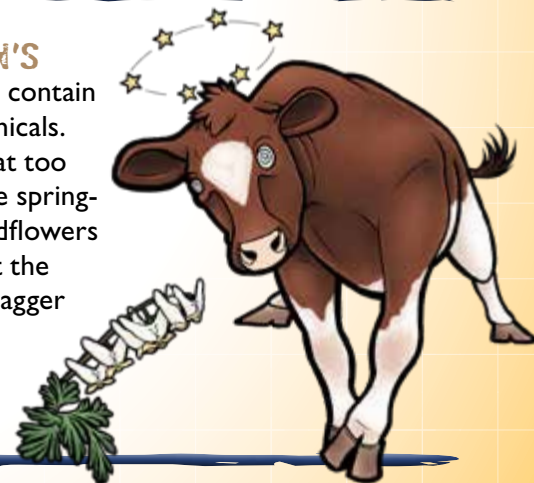
usually lay only one egg on each pawpaw plant: The baby caterpillars will happily eat any of their siblings that crawl too close.

COMMON MERGANSER

babies often hitch a ride on their mother's back as she swims through the water. This offers the little fluff balls some safety from fish and other underwater predators.



DUTCHMAN'S BREECHES contain druglike chemicals. Cattle that eat too many of these spring-blooming wildflowers often foam at the mouth and stagger around as though they were drunk.



Like four peas in a pod: **NINE-BANDED ARMADILLOS** always give birth to four — no more, no fewer — identical babies, either all boys or all girls. It takes a couple months for baby 'dillos to develop the protective armor adults possess.



HOW TO

Hang a Homemade Hammock

Nothing is more relaxing on a warm spring day than lying in a hammock and swinging with the breeze. No hammock? No problem. Here's how to rig one with supplies you likely have at home.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED

- Old bed sheet (a twin- or full-size sheet works best)
- Rope or parachute cord
- Tarp
- Pocketknife
- Tent stakes (optional)
- Two stout trees



Pro Tip

To protect the trees, wrap thick cardboard around each tree at the spot where the rope encircles its trunk.

HERE'S WHAT YOU DO

1



Tie each end of the sheet into a large overhand knot. Leave a tail of sheet sticking out so the knot won't come untied.

2



Cinch a length of rope or cord just below each knot. Each piece of rope needs to be long enough to stretch from the hammock to a tree. Make sure the rope is tied tightly so that it won't slide off of the sheet.

3



Attach the rope from each end of the hammock to separate trees. Make sure the hammock is about chest high — the rope will stretch and the hammock will sink a little when you sit in it.

4



Tie lengths of rope to the corner grommets (the little metal holes) of the tarp.

5



Tie the tarp between the two trees so that it hangs over the top of your hammock.

6



Using tent stakes, sharpened sticks, or heavy rocks, secure the ropes from the grommets to the ground so that the tarp forms a roof over your hammock.

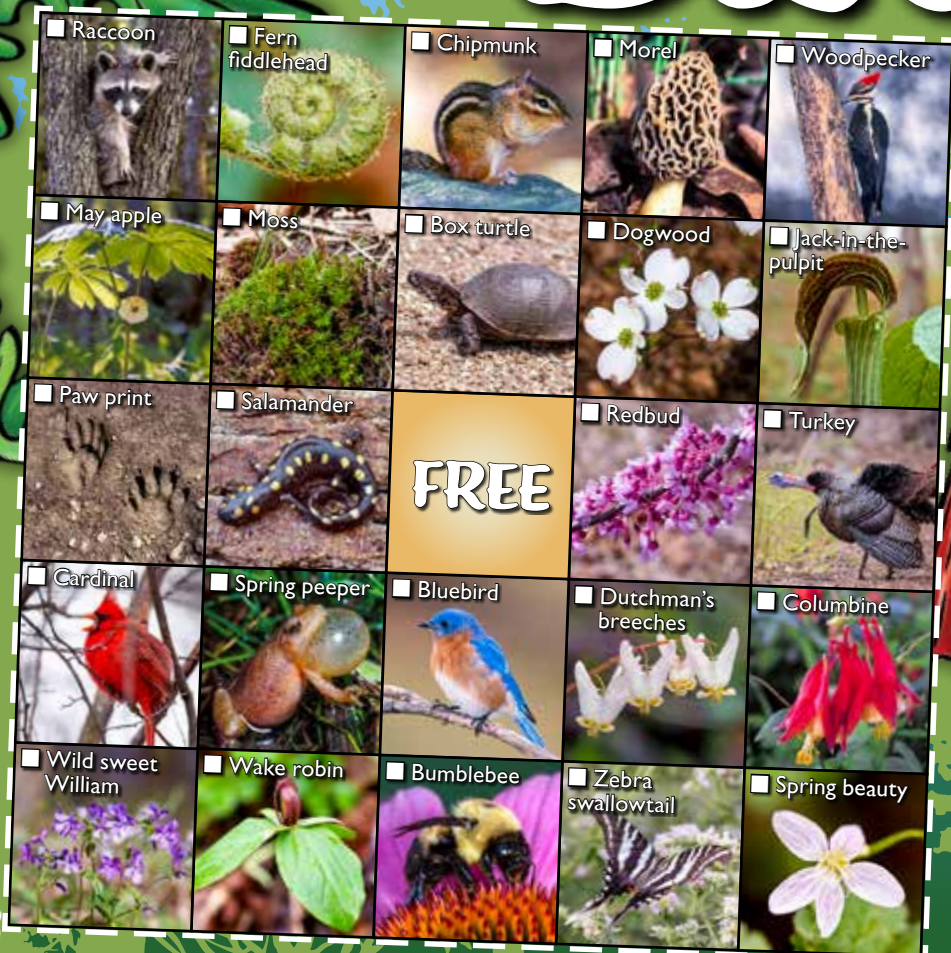
XPLOR MOR

Spring Woods Bin

A springtime walk in the woods is a delight for your senses. The forest turns green, birds sing, and the sweet scent of flowers hangs in the air. To make your walk even better, play "Spring Woods Bingo."

Instructions

Cut out the bingo cards. Bring the cards, a couple friends, and some pencils on your next hike. When you spot an item in the woods that's listed on the card, put an "X" in the corresponding box. When you get five X's in a row, yell "Xplor!"



WHAT IS IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —

under her "tail" or abdomen. After hatching, the young keep hanging out on mom's tail until they shed their skins twice. Then they start wandering away from mom, but they return to the safety of her tail if they feel threatened. Learn more at mdc.mo.gov/field-guide.

Crayfish usually mate in the fall, but the moms don't "lay" eggs until spring. Then the eggs, which look like berries, appear in a sticky mass. They stick to the mother's tiny, leglike swimmerets





Bingo ... er

Warning:

In “Spring Woods Bingo” if you say “bingo” instead of “Xplor,” you must erase one of your X’s and continue to look for items until you have five in a row again.

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mdc.mo.gov/xplor

FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

CRITTER CORNER

Baby Red-Shouldered Hawks



These nestlings are waiting for mom or dad to bring home lunch — maybe a frog or a mouse. Their parents will tend to them until they are ready to hunt on their own, sometime in mid-June. Red-shouldered hawks start nesting in mid-March, and their eggs hatch in late April or early May. You may spot nesting pairs in woods along creeks this spring. Listen for the parents' calls — a loud *kee-aah*! Learn more at mdc.mo.gov/field-guide.